

Soft-Pedaling the Legacy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe



By Zalman Newfield

We're all familiar with the hagiographies of *gedolim* that are standard fare in the *frum* world. The book reviewed here doesn't attribute the supernatural qualities to its subject that are common in *gedolim* books – and in avoiding this trope, it too fails to capture a realistic picture of the Rebbe and his followers.

Joseph Telushkin's *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History*, is not a naive work of hagiography. Telushkin presents ample evidence, thoughtfully evaluates it, and even occasionally states that he disagrees with the positions taken by his subject (such as the Rebbe's more uncompromising views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). Published in 2014 by Harper Wave, this 515-page tome is much more sophisticated than the typical biographies of ultra-Orthodox luminaries such as the Chazon Ish, the Satmar Rebbe, or Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, published by Orthodox presses like Artscroll, Mesorah, or Feldheim.

Nonetheless, anyone who reads Telushkin's book and is already familiar with the Rebbe, and certainly anyone who was raised Lubavitch as I was, will find his portrayal of the Rebbe peculiar. Telushkin's rendering of the Rebbe

is akin to a description of the Mona Lisa that makes no mention of her smile. Telushkin softens many of the features of the Rebbe that are most central for his followers.

The exact relationship between official Lubavitch representatives and Telushkin's book is unclear. Telushkin states that Ben Federman, a Lubavitch businessman, supported his project financially and made it possible for him to, "devote the years necessary to bring this book to fruition." He also states that he worked on the book for five years and made regular trips to Lubavitch world headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, to conduct his research. He was given access to unedited transcripts of 900

interviews with people who knew the Rebbe, and some 50 prominent Lubavitch representatives granted him interviews. Left unclear is whether officials in Lubavitch influenced the focus of the book or its conclusions. Whatever the case, *Rebbe*, based on both what it includes in and what it excludes from its pages, presents a distorted picture of who the Rebbe was and what it was about him that captivated his followers and so many others around the world.

Telushkin focuses on the ethical and positive attributes (*middos tovos*) the Rebbe possessed. According to Telushkin, the Rebbe always remained optimistic, was kind to all those he encountered, was sensitive in the extreme to the needs of oth-

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ers, and avoided the use of negative words (so, for example, the Rebbe would insist on referring to a hospital as “*beit refuah*,” a house of healing, rather than the common locution, “*beit cholim*,” a house of the ill).

While the Rebbe may well have embodied these admittedly admirable qualities, these were never the key focus of Lubavitchers’ attachment to the Rebbe. Lubavitchers are committed body and soul to the Rebbe because they believe—as is often openly discussed within the community—that the Rebbe is “*atzmus umihus milubash b’guf*,” the essence of God incarnate (literally “clothed in a body”); that he is the “*memutza hamichaber*,” the conduit that connects them to God and the avenue for divine blessings for the world. Period.

Telushkin focuses on how the Rebbe was respected by people in positions of authority. He was respected by American politicians from both major parties, and was

awarded a Congressional Gold Medal with bipartisan support. In Israel, too, politicians from across the political spectrum admired the Rebbe and consulted with him. Telushkin also focuses on the relationship between the Rebbe and the Modern Orthodox rabbinic giant, Rav Soloveitchik. Never mind that, aside from their time together

in university in Berlin in the early 1930s, the two men barely ever met in person. And they lived a fairly short car ride away from each other for over half a century!

Telushkin’s portrait of the Rebbe is certainly compelling, but as the rabbinic dictum goes, *ikar chosar min hasefer*: he misses the main point of what the Rebbe meant to his devout and devoted followers. Telushkin describes how thousands visited the Rebbe for one

-on-one meetings (*yeichidusen*) and how tens of thousands more came to receive a dollar for charity from the Rebbe’s hand and to be in his presence for a brief moment. He neglects to mention that many of these people believed that the Rebbe could perform miracles or that he could bestow blessings that would actually come to fruition. Instead Telushkin emphasizes the humanistic qualities of the Rebbe: how he genuinely cared for all of humanity, how he listened intently when others spoke, his uncanny ability to remember minor details in the lives of his thousands of visitors, and how

he would sometimes astonish visitors by mentioning a seemingly insignificant biographical detail told to him decades earlier.

Telushkin repeatedly states that Lubavitch now has “Chabad Houses in forty-eight American states ... and in some eighty countries ... run by over four thousand Chabad couples,” and that

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Lubavitch global operations have doubled in size since the Rebbe’s passing in 1994. The obvious question is, how did the Rebbe manage to inspire thousands of his followers to travel literally to the ends of the earth to strengthen Judaism, thousands of miles away from their families, friends, and developed Jewish communities?

Telushkin states that “the secret” of Lubavitch success after the Rebbe’s death is the same as before

it—the Rebbe. But he doesn't explain what the Rebbe meant to his followers during his lifetime, so the secret remains a mystery to the readers of this book. The thousands of people who have uprooted their lives and traveled across the world to assist complete strangers didn't do so because their leader used positive words and took a personal interest in their lives. The thousands who visit the gravesite of the Rebbe at Old Montefiore Cemetery, in Queens, New York, each year do not come because the Rebbe found a way to "express disagreement without being disagreeable," or because he made a habit of working with people he disagreed with.

In truth, they do these things because Lubavitchers still believe, even after his death, that the Rebbe is vital for their connection to God; because they are totally devoted to him and believe that his wishes are still their commands. Furthermore, their persistent belief that the Rebbe continues to provide them with protection and blessings in their work is what gives them confidence to continue in their outreach mission, despite any obstacles they may face.

Undoubtedly, Telushkin is aware of the spiritual beliefs



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Lubavitchers maintain about the Rebbe. It would be difficult to have a casual conversation for a few minutes with committed Lubavitchers and *not* hear about them, let alone the five years Telushkin spent immersed in Crown Heights researching his book. It seems clear that Telushkin, his publisher, or the official Lubavitch representatives he interacted with, chose to present a softer, more digestible, human version of the Rebbe, one that glosses over the most basic Lubavitch beliefs about the Rebbe's spiritual status and powers.

This secularized and sanitized version of the Rebbe misses the point of who the Rebbe was and what he meant (and still means 25 years after his death!) to his fervent

followers and to many others. In order to assess the life of the Rebbe, the public needs books about him that accurately detail who he was, what he represented, and what he meant to his thousands of acolytes around the world.

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